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Understanding the Context of Rock Art Through Archaeological/Cultural Landscaping

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Abstract

The concept of cultural/archaeological landscapes is relatively a new subject though this concept is widely accepted internationally. India has varied ecological landscapes embedded in rich traditional wisdom. Today, some traditional concepts in archaeology are being challenged by landscape archaeology and the concept of discrete 'sites' has become secondary. Attempts are also being made in different parts of the world to trace the relationship between landscape and rock art. However, this requires a logical and interdisciplinary research approach to reconstruct the rock art landscape(s).

Defining a Cultural Landscape

The landscape has always been seen in a variety of different ways, by different viewers. D. W. Meinig, a geographer, identified ten perspectives on the same landscape, ranging from landscape as wealth to landscape as a system. Each accentuated a different aspect of value in the landscape. As he points out, "any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads" (Meinig, 1976). Noting the "tremendous variations in status, meaning, and usages of the term 'landscape' today" and the different purposes that landscape serves for each of the many disciplines interested in it, Eugene J. Palka observed that each has a different focus, objectives, scales of analysis, epistemologies and methodologies. The commonalities that he finds in it has emphasis on that which is visible with an understanding that landscapes evolve through a process of human-led interactions, a

recognition of a time dimension as it pertains to landscape evolution, and a vagueness surrounding the spatial dimension or areal extent of landscape (Palka, 1995). In Australia, the preconceptions on the part of the colonisers and the Aborigines regarding landscapes there were different, but both reflected a concept of place, inherent experiential qualities, constructs informed by memory and myths, and links of the past with the present and the future (Taylor, 1997). Anthropologists and Aboriginal/indigenous people working on tradition who use studies, and undertakings to re-establish the cultural landscape on the west Coast have applied this dilemma to ways of seeing the west coast landscape: in contrast to the visitors and the scientist, who perceive Gwaii Haan as wilderness, the Haida people see their homeland, Haida Gwaii, as a place steeped in the historical and spiritual evidence of their centuries-long occupation.

Associative cultural landscapes mark a significant shift from conventional heritage concepts rooted in physical resources, whether it be a cultural heritage monument or wilderness as natural heritage. They also accentuate the indivisibility of cultural and natural values in cultural landscapes. While many landscapes have religious, artistic or cultural associations, associative cultural landscapes are distinguished by their associations with the natural environment, rather than by their material evidence, which may be minimal or entirely absent. The range of natural features associated with a cosmological, symbolic, sacred, and culturally significant landscape may be very broad: mountains, caves, outcrops, rivers, lakes, springs, hillsides, uplands, plains, woods, groves, trees. The concept of “cultural landscapes” has thus become widely accepted internationally by diverse heritage bodies. While individual definitions vary, their direction focuses consistently on the inter-relatedness of society and the natural environment.

Cultural Landscape: A World Heritage

The concept of cultural landscapes is a relatively new one in the heritage conservation movement, but over about the past 25 years it has emerged as a significant way of looking at a place focusing not on monuments but on the relationship between human activity and the natural environment. In 1992, the World Heritage Committee, the administrative body of the World Heritage Convention, adopted a definition for the cultural landscape of outstanding universal value, agreeing that the “Cultural landscape represents the ‘combined works of nature and of man’...illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlements overtime, under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic and cultural forces, both external and internal” (UNESCO, 1996a). Its three main categories- the clearly defined landscape, intentionally

designed and created by man, the organically evolved landscape: a relict or containing relicts, and the associative cultural landscape- provide an elementary identification of types that can encompass the wide range of cultural landscapes around the world.

After cultural landscapes were added to the list of properties eligible for nomination to the World Heritage List, a range of designed, organically evolved, and associative cultural landscapes have been inscribed. Many landscapes embody characteristics of all the three types. In the designed landscape, however, it is anticipated that aesthetic considerations prevail over other values. By virtue of their organic nature and human use over time, all landscapes may be said to have evolved. The essence of the organically evolved cultural landscape, whether relict or continuing, is that its most significant values lie in the material evidence of its evolution from a cultural initiative to its present form, in association with the natural environment. Examples inscribed on the World Heritage List to date have been consistently identified under the criteria of “an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement or land-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), and these have been primarily agricultural and village settlement landscapes, such as the Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras, the Costiera Amalfitana and Portovenere, Cinque Terre, and the Islands in Italy.

Indian Perspective

India, a land of diversity, has varied cultural and ecological landscapes embedded in rich traditional wisdom. The composition of the country’s multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-level population is as significant as its linguistic and religious bonds, which shape the destiny of the country’s composite civilisation. In India most traditional societies, including tribal, live in the forest uplands and so far they have been able to conserve their traditional wisdom in the face of modernisation. The sustainable livelihoods of these traditional societies is often based on traditional knowledge, wisdom and technology, developed in a given ecological, socio-economic and cultural setting, accumulated over a long period of human evolution. These societies have been able to conserve and enhance biodiversity. The importance of their culture lies in initiating the younger generation into the traditional knowledge of medicinal plants, methods of preservation of the variety of agriculture produce, and respect for the living organisms in the forest and the settlements. The food related features of the environment, habits, the construction of houses, household articles, hunting implements and fishing tools, the treatment of diseases, attitude towards the soil, lifecycle rituals and festivals correspond to their reality of nature. They are locally and

culturally rooted. The solar and lunar calendars are the most fundamental devices of the tribal-rural-urban continuum and of interaction even within single communities.

Arts and crafts are inseparable from the lifestyles of traditional societies. There is a culture specific variation of oral traditions in the performing and visual arts, the use of metal, clothing, etc. Each craft has a primarily utilitarian as well as a symbolic function. But the form and design are conditional to, and governed by, the community's worldview as well as the mythical and ritual and function an article plays at any given movement. Artistic manifestation is intrinsic to the lifestyle of these peoples and rhythm punctuates both rituals and festivals. These skills are transmitted from one generation to the next. While following the evolutionary approach to propositions regarding human cognitive development and the process of the evolutionary emergence of language – “scientific” theories are suggested to explain the “origin of art”. Such claims may be considered ethnocentric, Eurocentric, or astringently anthropocentric. Without questioning the internationality of such viewpoints, we may turn to a cosmo centric view of art that may not be generally shared, but there are good reasons to develop the sacred science of nature and culture within the framework of the “normal sciences”.

The process of industrialisation, modernisation and urbanisation has induced a massive geo-ethnic dislocation, leading to a profound disorientation in people's lives and their value systems. It is apparent that the forces of change encourage a “commercialised mass culture”. This is a sort of neo-cultural mobility encouraging a new kind of homogenisation. Due to the process of homogenisation, the earlier idea of cultural diversity is now losing ground. It has generally been accepted that there should be a concerted effort to preserve the wealth and diversity of cultural heritage, and the question of development of culture should be attuned to the ideas and values of contemporary society. Scholars and cultural policy-making bodies have now recognised that there is a need to reorient cultural planning. Because the ecological issues in sustainable development have social, economic, anthropological and cultural dimensions, decision makers firmly believe that “preservation of cultural heritage” should be complimentary to the “enhancement of culture”. Culture should serve as an agency of development.

In the “worlds” of many small-scale societies or pre-modern societies, stones serve to anchor historical and mythical events, often linked to actions of specific or generalised ancestors. They can contain considerable cosmogony, spiritual significance, and be powerful and potent social agents in their own right.

Landscape Archaeology

Landscape archaeology is a method and theory for the study of the material traces of past peoples within the context of their interactions in the wider (typically regional) social and natural environment they inhabited. The landscape may be large, such as a wide marshy river delta, or small, such as a back garden. The key feature that distinguishes landscape archaeology from (e.g.) [site](#)-based approaches is that there is an explicit emphasis on the study of the relationships between archaeological data (e.g. between [sites](#) and/or cultural modifications to landscapes such as [ditches](#), [burial mounds](#), [field systems](#), [roads](#), etc.) and cultural phenomena and their natural setting or environment. The origins of a specific body of theory dealing with these questions can be traced to at least the 1950s and 1960s in archaeology. Techniques used in landscape archaeology, principally [archaeological field surveys](#) and associated technologies, are often practiced in [cultural resources management](#) to identify vulnerable sites.

Landscape archaeology has challenged some traditional concepts in archaeology, for example, the question of what exactly constitutes an [archaeological site](#) has been discussed at length by generations of archaeologists. By adopting a landscape archaeology viewpoint, the concept of a discrete 'site' becomes secondary. Areas of investigation are not limited to the boundaries of an [excavation](#) but can instead stretch many miles beyond it. Excavation is usually impractical on such a scale and landscape archaeologists focus on the visible features that can be identified and recorded on the ground surface, to create a picture of human activity across a region.

While closely examining areas using archaeological techniques has resulted in large numbers of new archaeological sites being discovered, landscape archaeology has also been adopted on a smaller scale in [parks](#) and [gardens](#), for example where relatively modern planting and [landscaping](#) have been surveyed to provide information on the historic form of gardens. Hedges have been shown to preserve the lines of medieval boundaries and prehistoric [ritual](#) landscapes have been identified, apparently separate from more day-to-day areas of past activity.

Looking into the lifestyle and rich cultural heritage of different communities of India (both tangible and intangible forms): geomorphology, topography, settlement patterns, habitat, economic systems, art & crafts, architecture, belief systems, etc., and the inroads made by the modern era and materialistic mind set, there seems an immediate need to adopt the concept of the cultural Landscape/Archaeology Landscape in India and conduct more and more studies in this field. This approach should also be applied to the preservation and conservation of the country's great traditions.

Rock Art and Landscape

Landscape archaeology sometimes has a narrower application in the archaeological profession, where it is used to describe the archaeological investigation of formally planned areas, such as the landscaped gardens of large estates and public parks. But for the potential landscape, we may include archaeological sites of great value. This may include relict village sites, other habitation sites, burials, rock art sites, other resource sites, etc. Important landscapes, which are no longer associated with living cultures, are called relict cultural landscapes.

Rock art is basically a tangible reflection of intangible components of culture, basically achieved through a coordination of vision, mind and hand. It should be treated as a representation of visual histories, reflecting ancient people's lifestyles and their belief systems, environment, *geomorphology* and so on. In order to make conjectures about these depictions, it is necessary to identify the earliest reflections of the human mind within its cultural and/or behavioural context. The theoretical framework of this work is based on the landscape assumptions proposed by C. Tilley (2002), where the "physical" world is not simply made of inert things but full of significant properties that matter to its inhabitants. In this sense, the outcrops and their forms were not simple surfaces to carve but acting agents that contributed to the meaning of these rock art sites and with a story to tell for posterity. A logical and interdisciplinary research approach is required to reconstruct the historical, palaeoenvironment and archaeological dynamics of the rock art landscape.

Some researchers in different parts of the world have tried to follow the approach described above and to reconstruct rock art landscapes in archaeological and cultural contexts. As suggested by Marshall Sahlins (1988), unlike time, space can be reconstructed, reinvented, reinterpreted, or even manipulated. Other researchers working in this area include Christopher Tilley (2002, 2004), Julian Thomas (2006), Richard Bradley ((2009), Chris Gosden (2009), Chris Scarre (2009), et. al.

An attempt has been made in the Oukaïmeden Valley, High Atlas and Morocco to trace the relationship between the mountain landscape and rock art. According to the information collected and data analyses, "the valley of Oukaimeden was a marginal area until the mid-Holocene. The process of regular occupation of the valley, even if seasonally, implied a foundational moment in which most probably the engravings of animals were fundamental to mark the world won from Nature. From then onwards, engravings were used as symbolic tools to structure the world in which humans lived, and those features which were strategic to them. Therefore, the analysis of the relationships between the evidence of a human presence in the valley –mostly rock art

engravings- and the natural resources was the key to achieving a proper understanding of Oukaimeden history. In fact, the spatial distribution of the rock art sites detected through the CA (Correspondence Analyses) already showed some interesting criteria, revealing that the prehistoric depictions were concentrated on both sides of the valley and to a less extent in the centre. While the engravings of the Protohistoric period had a more systematic distribution throughout the territory, implying a higher control over it". (Ruiz-Galvez, et. al. 2015).

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